

order, following the remarks of Senator KLOBUCHAR.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Senator from Minnesota.

CALLING FOR AN INDEPENDENT, NONPARTISAN COMMISSION

Ms. KLOBUCHAR. Mr. President, I rise today to express my deep concern about this administration's ties to the country of Russia. We are just 3 months into the 115th Congress, and I have come to the Senate floor multiple times to discuss inappropriate contact between Trump administration officials and the Russian Government. This is truly unprecedented.

Our Constitution was set up to guarantee that our democracy would be free of influence from foreign powers. For months, U.S. intelligence agencies have said that Russia used covert cyber attacks, espionage, and propaganda to try to undermine our democracy. Reports show it, and the facts prove it. As I learned from my trip at the end of the year with Senator MCCAIN and Senator GRAHAM to the Baltics, Georgia, and Ukraine, this is not unique to our country and our elections and our democracy. This is something that has gone on for years—where Russia shut down the internet in the little country of Estonia simply because they had the audacity to move a bronze statue to a public square in Lithuania where they invited members of the Ukrainian Parliament who were in exile from Crimea in Kiev and invited them to Lithuania to celebrate their 25th anniversary of independence from Russia, and then they attempted to hack into the computers of the members of the Parliament in Lithuania.

As Senator MARCO RUBIO noted, this is not just about one party or one candidate or even about one country; this is an assault on democracies across the world. Last month, we learned that the very day President Obama imposed sanctions on Russia, with unprecedented attacks on our democracy, General Flynn, a member of the Trump transition team, spoke to a senior Russian official regarding those sanctions. The National Security Adviser, the person charged with the most sensitive matters of U.S. national security, then misled the Vice President of the United States and then, in turn, the American people. He resigned, as did the former chairman of the Trump campaign; he resigned.

Now we have learned that Attorney General Sessions met with the Russian Ambassador. Fine, Members meet with Ambassadors; we know that happens. But in fact, he met with the Russian Ambassador only 3 days after then-President Obama was at the G20 Summit. He was at the G20 Summit, and he met with Vladimir Putin himself. He told him to stop the cyber attacks, but he also told him that America was not going to back down from the sanctions. In fact, President Obama told the

whole world that day in a press conference that we were not going to roll over and back down on the sanctions imposed against Russia because of their illegal invasion of Ukraine.

What happened 3 days later? Then-Senator Sessions, now our Attorney General, in fact, met with the Russian Ambassador.

Senator Sessions was then asked about contacts with the Russians from Trump officials during his hearing. I was there. I serve on the Judiciary Committee. Senator FRANKEN posed some of those questions, in addition to Senator LEAHY, who has noted that, at best, the answer was misleading.

That is why I feel so strongly that a press conference today is not enough and that Senator Sessions must come before the Judiciary Committee and answer under oath the questions that we now have.

What are those questions?

What was actually said at the meeting? Were sanctions discussed? Remember, 3 days—this meeting occurred 3 days after President Obama had said he would not roll back the sanctions. Were the sanctions discussed? Why did the Russian Ambassador, by the way, not meet with many other Members that day? We may not have a full accounting, but it appears that many of the Armed Services Committee members did not meet with the Russian Ambassador that day.

No. 2, what were the discussions with the Trump administration, then-campaign officials back in September, before that meeting occurred between Senator Sessions and the Russian Ambassador? What were the discussions leading into it? What were the discussions after the meeting? Those are things we truly need to know.

For weeks, Senator Sessions could have corrected the record—for weeks, during the time in which this Russian issue and the contact with the Trump administration were discussed thoroughly. For weeks, I have been calling on Senator Sessions, now Attorney General Sessions, to recuse himself from any investigation into Russia.

There are clear Department of Justice guidelines about conflicts of interest, and, as I have said for weeks, when you read those rules, there is a clear conflict of interest. Today, Attorney General Sessions agreed to a partial recusal. He recused himself on the part of the investigation that relates to the Presidential campaign. Well, the American people deserve a full recusal.

Think about it. The meeting between General Flynn and the Russian Ambassador took place after the campaign ended. The meeting that we just learned about today between the President's son-in-law and Russian officials happened after the campaign ended. We need a full recusal and an independent counsel to manage the investigation of contacts between the Russian Government, the Trump campaign, and the Trump administration.

I believe, as I have noted earlier, that Attorney General Sessions must come

before the Senate Judiciary Committee under oath and answer these questions:

Were sanctions discussed? What were his discussions leading into that meeting with the Russian Ambassador? What were the discussions afterwards? And I am sure my other colleagues on the Judiciary Committee have many, many other questions.

I know when I asked about Russia at Senator Sessions' nomination hearing, I asked him very specifically if he had any reason to doubt the evidence put forward by our 17 intelligence agencies that there had, in fact, been an attempt by a foreign government, the country of Russia, to influence our election. He said he had no reason to doubt those findings. He had no reason to doubt those findings, so he clearly understood when you read that report how important this is—the \$200 million spent in propaganda by Russian TV, as well as the hacking, as well as the attempts to influence the election.

So we have these facts. We know that meeting took place just 3 days after the President, our then-President Obama, met with Vladimir Putin at the G20 Summit. We know that is a time when Putin was told by the President of the United States to stop undermining the U.S. election system with cyber attacks. This was back in September before the election even occurred. We saw Paul Manafort resign from the campaign over Russia. We saw General Flynn step down over his contacts with the Russian Ambassador, and then we have that meeting. To me this seems like a pattern, and I want to not only see the facts through the investigations that are ongoing but also hear from the Attorney General himself.

That is why I am calling for the Department of Justice inspector general to investigate the actions of the Attorney General and whether the ongoing investigation into the Trump campaign and administration contacts with the Russian Government has been compromised in any way.

We know that Russia attempted to interfere with our election. Russia tries to undermine our democracy. This is not fake news. This is as real as it gets.

Aides and surrogates of this administration during the campaign and the transition were in contact with officials from a foreign government that was actively working to bring our democracy down. They were actively working to influence our elections. As Senator RUBIO has noted, one time it is one candidate and one political party, and the next time it will be the other candidate and the other political party, unless we all come together in a bipartisan fashion to get to the bottom of the facts.

So how do we do that beyond the recusal and the independent counsel and having Senator Sessions come back before the Judiciary Committee to thoroughly answer my questions and the questions of my colleagues? Well,

the other way we do it is by having an independent commission. That is why I introduced, along with Senators CARDIN, LEAHY, FEINSTEIN, and CARPER, the bill that was announced by Senator CARDIN and me, with ADAM SCHIFF and ELIJAH CUMMINGS, that would create an independent, nonpartisan commission to uncover all the facts and make sure that future elections and political campaigns are safeguarded from foreign interference. Remember that this commission can go alongside the Intelligence Committee investigation—not to replace it but to be in addition to it—because this committee and experts appointed by this Congress from both sides of the aisle, just like the 9/11 Commission so successfully did, could actually not just uncover some facts that aren't known publicly, but, most importantly, they can make recommendations to make sure this doesn't happen again.

By the way, there are upcoming elections in Germany and in France, and getting that information out there doesn't just help our democracy, it also helps democracies in other parts of the world. We also need—and I touched on this earlier—an independent counsel, special prosecutor to look into all the contacts between the Trump administration and the campaign and have a full recusal.

What else can Congress do besides the independent commission? We have to make sure that the Intelligence Committee proceeds with its investigation. I am pleased that Senator BURR and Senator WARNER have come together and announced that they are going to do a full and thorough investigation. They will also be looking into the contacts with the campaign—incredibly important.

Now we have the issue of the sanctions. As I mentioned, the day that the Obama administration was imposing additional sanctions on Russia—and the Trump campaign, through General Flynn, was actually meeting during this transition day with the Russian Ambassador to perhaps undermine those sanctions—I was with Senators MCCAIN and GRAHAM in Eastern Europe. As I noted, when we were in the Baltics, we heard and met with leaders—Prime Ministers and Presidents of these countries in Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia, who have seen this movie before. We went to Ukraine. We went to Georgia. We heard from Ukraine—6,500 attempts to hack into their coun-

try's computer system alone, shutting down access in Estonia. Trolls, in a building in Moscow—nearly 1,000 people—who are now working and have been working to undermine democracies all around the world.

So this isn't just about defending our own democracy; it is about defending the world's democracies. It is about saying to a country that thinks they can just get us to roll over and say: Hey, you can influence our election. No, that is not right. That is why we worked for expanded sanctions; that is why we introduced on a bipartisan basis with Senator MCCAIN and Senator GRAHAM—and I was one of the original sponsors with Senator CARDIN and others—the Countering Russian Hostilities Act that would impose more sanctions on Russia. It would address cyber attacks, human rights violations, and its illegal annexation of land in Ukraine and Georgia.

Just this weekend, on Sunday afternoon, I met with my Ukrainian community. Hundreds of people showed up on a Sunday afternoon in Minnesota because they are so concerned about their friends and relatives and they so believe in our democracy. Right down the road from the Ukrainian Center, where we held our meeting and where I listened and answered questions from my constituents, is a deli called Kramarczuk's. It is owned by a Ukrainian immigrant family whose parents came over to our country having fled oppression, and they came over to our country and bought this deli. They put this beautiful mural across an entire wall, and it is a beautiful photo of our Statue of Liberty, that beacon of democracy.

Because of the Kramarczucs—they believe in our country. They believe in America. They believe in a country that is going to stand up for freedom of the press, that is going to stand up for freedom of religion, and that is going to stand up for them and their rights as immigrants to be citizens in this country. They believe in it because they have seen the worst of it. They have seen dictatorships, they have seen oppression, and they came to our country. They expect our country, as they serve their Ukrainian food to the people all over Minnesota in front of the big mural of the Statue of Liberty—they believe that our country is going to stand up for democracy.

That was the message that Senator MCCAIN, Senator GRAHAM, and I

brought to the people of Ukraine. We not only, of course, met with the President and their official leaders, but we also went right to the frontline. On New Year's Eve, we were in Eastern Ukraine on the sea—cold, snow coming down—with hundreds and hundreds of Ukrainian troops, hearing the stories of a mother who was so young, who had just lost her son a week before to a Russian separatist sniper. We heard the stories of the 10,000 people killed just as this conflict began, standing up for democracy, just as we have stood up for our democracy.

So when all of these discussions go on about recusals and about who should resign and what should happen, let's remember what this is all about. This is about saving our democracy and making our democracy strong so we can continue to be the beacon that those Ukrainians put on their wall in their deli because they believe in this country so much. This isn't about partisan divides. This is simply about being a democracy and getting to the bottom of it. When something goes on and a foreign country is trying to influence things, you have to put your party aside. You have to say: You know what, I want to know what happened here. If I am a Democrat or Republican, I want to know what happened so it doesn't happen again. I want to be able to protect our citizens and our election system and our democracy. That is what this is about.

Thank you, Mr. President.

I yield the floor.

ADJOURNMENT UNTIL MONDAY,
MARCH 6, 2017, AT 2 P.M.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. YOUNG). Under the previous order, the Senate stands adjourned until 2 p.m. on Monday.

Thereupon, the Senate, at 6 p.m., adjourned until Monday, March 6, 2017, at 2 p.m.

CONFIRMATIONS

Executive nominations confirmed by the Senate March 2, 2017:

DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN
DEVELOPMENT

BENJAMIN S. CARSON, SR., OF FLORIDA, TO BE SECRETARY OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT.

DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

JAMES RICHARD PERRY, OF TEXAS, TO BE SECRETARY OF ENERGY.